

# ROUND 2 IN LEBANON:

## How the IDF Focused Exclusively on COIN and Lost the Ability to Fight Maneuver War

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Israel has defeated larger Arab armies repeatedly since its creation in 1948. The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) enjoyed a reputation of invincibility among its Arab neighbors until last year. Israel got bloodied and bogged down in Lebanon by a stateless military organization: Hezbollah's military wing, the Islamic Resistance (IR). The Israeli high command expected the air force alone to crush the IR. Instead, the air force killed many civilians and destroyed property but could not stop the IR rockets and missiles that rained daily on Israel. When IDF troops tried to push their way into a well-prepared defense, they failed. It seems that the Israelis have lost their ability to conduct high-intensity maneuver warfare. What happened to the IDF?

### The Strategic Setting

On July 12, 2006, IR forces executed a deliberate ambush inside Israel against two IDF armored vehicles using anti-tank mines and rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs). The attack killed three and wounded two. The IR also captured two Israeli soldiers. The IDF immediately dispatched a Merkava tank and a mechanized platoon in order to free the two POWs. The tank hit a massive (500-600lbs) improvised explosive device (IED), which instantly killed the four-man crew. An eighth Israeli soldier was killed during a firefight with IR soldiers. On that day, the Hezbollah inflicted the highest fatality toll against Israel since 1987.

Since the mid-1980s, Israel has had border skirmishes with Hezbollah. In May of 2000, Israel decided to pull its troops out from southern Lebanon, thus satisfying one of Hezbollah's key demands. Following the withdrawal, Israel warned the Hezbollah that any cross-border offensive action would result in full military retaliation. After six years of relative quiet on the border, Israeli political and military leaders grew complacent about the Hezbollah threat. Their focus was on destroying the Palestinian terrorist infrastructure within Israel?

In the meantime, IR forces had been building conventional defensive positions to counter any future Israeli incursion. Iran delivered large amounts of weapons to the IR and provided military training to IR forces. By the summer of 2006, the IR was no longer a rag-tag guerilla organization; it was a highly trained and combat-ready force capable of conducting a determined defense.



### The Tactical Situation

**Mission** — The mission and purpose of the IR was to launch missiles at Israel in order to cause physical and psychological damage to the country. Israel's mission was to stop Hezbollah from launching missiles while minimizing friendly casualties.

**Equipment** — Hezbollah was no longer a guerrilla force. The IR fighter's individual weapon was the AK-47 assault rifle. IR fighters were also armed with individual anti-tank weapons such as the RPG-7, RPG-9, TOW, AT-3, AT-4, AT-5, AT-13, and the AT-14. The IR anti-aircraft arsenal consisted of the SA-7 Strela-2, ZU-23 AA guns, S-60 57mm AA guns, and possibly the SA-18 Grail. IR medium and long-range rockets consisted of the 122mm Katyusha, the 240mm Fajr-3, the Fajr-5,

the Zelzal-2, and the Syrian-made Uragan missile. IR anti-ship missiles consisted of the C-802 and C-701. IR air assets consisted of the Mirsad-1 unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV), which is capable of surveillance and observation. On the other hand, the Israeli military is a modern, fully-equipped force with the latest weapons and equipment. Israel has a lot of U.S.-manufactured equipment and produces top-quality military systems of its own.

**Terrain** — Southern Lebanon is mountainous, and its canalizing terrain provides good concealment despite the sparse vegetation. IR forces had the advantage of terrain to emplace preplanned counter-mobility obstacles, such as tank ditches and mines. IR fighters knew the terrain of southern Lebanon; IDF soldiers did not.

**Troops Available** — IR forces committed 600-800 full-time fighters and 5,000 to 7,000 part-time fighters. Israel committed 8,000 ground troops.

**Time Available** — Israeli political and military leaders knew they had only a few weeks before the United Nations Security Council and world pressure intervened to stop Israeli military action in Lebanon. Also, long military campaigns are extremely costly to the Israeli economy. The Hezbollah, on the other hand, had no such time constraints. Quite the contrary, the longer the IR could withstand Israel, the more public support would be gained, especially in the Arab world.

**Civilians on the Battlefield** — The IR structured its defenses within civilian population centers. They designed their defense knowing the Israelis were reluctant to inflict high civilian casualties among its enemies. The IR's defense forced the Israelis

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to engage in dangerous house-to-house fighting and suffer a high number of friendly casualties.

### Comparison of Opposing Forces

**The IDF** — The troop strength of the IDF is approximately 125,000 active duty troops, of which 40,000 are career soldiers. The IDF can also call up to 600,000 reserve soldiers.

Israeli ground forces have nearly 4,000 tanks and 11,000 armored vehicles at their disposal. There are three active duty armored brigades and four infantry brigades. The infantry brigades are similar in training and organization. Every infantry brigade is made up of three infantry battalions, a signal company, and a reconnaissance battalion.

Prior to the war, the IDF chief of staff, General Dan Halutz, launched a new cost-saving logistical system called “regional logistics.” The initiative stripped units of their organic logistics support elements and proved to be a significant liability during the war.

Traditionally, the primary role of the IDF has been to defend Israel in a conventional high-intensity war. However, years of low intensity conflict with the Palestinians modified their training to focus mostly on urban counterinsurgency. The second *intifada* increased the operational tempo to the point that regular units had to significantly reduce their training time. Most training exercises involved only platoon and company-sized elements. Battalion and brigade-size exercises became a rarity. Severe budget cuts affected the training and readiness of reserve units. In 2003, reserve units did not conduct any training at all! Army leaders decided to limit large-scale training exercises for reservists to once every three years.

Prior to the war, Israel had demonstrated an impressive intelligence gathering capability against its enemies. However, now, the IDF attacked using limited and inaccurate intelligence concerning IR’s strength, activities and capabilities. Political and budgetary factors were the main reasons for the IDF’s lack of intelligence about the IR.

Since the “Yom Kippur” war of 1973, Israel has been mainly involved in medium and low-intensity conflicts. These types of conflicts are mostly fought at the company level and below. Therefore, junior combat

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leaders have had years of combat experience while senior leaders lack operational experience.

General Halutz, a former air force commander, focused IDF doctrine and training solely on counterinsurgency operations in urbanized terrain. He believed that “targeted killing” from the air was the preferred technique to fight terrorists. General Halutz diverted much-needed funds from the ground forces to the Israeli Air Force. Ground forces became secondary in importance in the fight against terrorism.

Despite this, IDF troop morale was high at the beginning of the war in Lebanon due to repeated successes against Palestinian terror groups. Israeli soldiers were eager to fight and defeat the Hezbollah once and for all.

**IR Forces** — IR forces numbered between 600-800 full-time fighters and 5,000-7,000 reserve soldiers. The Hezbollah could have called up to 25,000 reserve fighters.

The IR was the most technologically advanced para-military force in the world. IR fighters were equipped with advanced night-vision and communications equipment. IR forces use advanced technology to gather intelligence, such as the Mirsad-1 UAVs equipped with infrared cameras and GPS navigation. During the war, Israeli soldiers found rooms full of Iranian-made equipment including listening devices, computers, and communications devices.

Hezbollah’s supply of arms and equipment mainly came from Iran. Hezbollah used a complex of tunnels and bunker systems to store weapons, ammunition, food, water, and medical supplies. The intent of IR commanders was for every bunker system to be completely self-sufficient.

Hezbollah had an effective command, control, and communications system in place prior to the war. The IR divided southern Lebanon into different sectors, each consisting of 12-15 villages. IR forces

used sophisticated fiber-optic communication equipment that resisted Israeli electronic jamming and countermeasures. Individual IR fighters used encrypted Motorola two-way radios to communicate with one another. Hence, every level of command had control of ongoing fighting and knew the status of adjacent fighting positions. The Hezbollah also made extensive use of the internet for information warfare and propaganda in order to promote their message and gain support throughout the Arab world.

Hezbollah had an advanced intelligence apparatus. Hezbollah gathered human intelligence mainly from Israeli Arabs and Druze who had served in the IDF. Thus, IR forces knew exact locations of certain military installations throughout Israel and targeted them during the war. The Hezbollah also used large sums of money and drugs to recruit informers within Israel. Finally, IR forces used UAVs to gather intelligence against Israel.

### The Action

On July 12, the day of the ambush, the Israeli Air Force responded with air raids aimed at cutting IR supply lines. IDF ground operations started on July 17 in the vicinity of Maroun Al-Ras (See Figure 1, Inset 1). IR forces surprised the IDF with an effective defense consisting of bunkers, tunnels, and firing positions. It took six days of intense close-quarter combat for the IDF to secure the town of Maroun Al-Ras. The battle cost the IDF six KIAs and 18 WIAs. Once secured, Maroun Al-Ras became the IDF’s launching site for follow-on combat operations against the towns of Bent Jbail, a large Shia town bordering Israel (see Figure 1, Inset 1). Prior to entering Bent Jbail, Israeli artillery hit targets in the vicinity of Bent Jbail with approximately 3,000 shells. Despite the artillery preparation, the IDF met stiff resistance. IR fighters conducted numerous IED and anti-tank ambushes while remaining concealed in the city ruins. They successfully destroyed a Merkava tank, killing two of its crew. The 35th Airborne Brigade was tasked to setup blocking positions north-west of the city but were unable to reach their objective. The Golani Brigade moved east of the city but came under intense anti-tank missile, RPG and mortar fire, which caused 30 casualties. The narrow streets made it

difficult and dangerous for Israeli armored vehicles to maneuver.

After eight days of intense fighting, the town of Bent Jbail was still not completely secured. Consequently, IDF ground commanders put combat in Bent Jbail on hold and shifted their focus to the town of Aita el-Shaab (Figure 1, Inset 2). There, too, IDF troops were faced with a solid IR defense. This time though, IR soldiers inside the town used hit and run tactics while IR soldiers in the surrounding hills conducted near and far ambushes.

On August 11, the IDF launched a major offensive against the village of al Ghandourieh in order to seize a strategic road junction south of the Litani River (Figure 1, Inset 3). A brigade of "Nahal" infantry troops conducted an air assault mission into the vicinity to provide security for an armored force approaching from the east through Wadi Saluki. The mission of the armored force was to destroy IR rockets, firing positions, and hidden bases. IR forces quickly deployed in the vicinity and setup ambush positions in the dense undergrowth. Once in position, IR forces detonated an IED which destroyed the commander's tank. The detonation initiated a massive anti-armor ambush with IR fighters firing anti-tank missiles, RPGs, and mortars. The ambush killed 12 Israeli soldiers and damaged 11 tanks. Despite these setbacks, the IDF was eventually able to secure al Ghandourieh, which turned out

to be of little tactical value. On August 14, all major combat operations ended, and Israel started to redeploy its troops back to Israel on August 16.

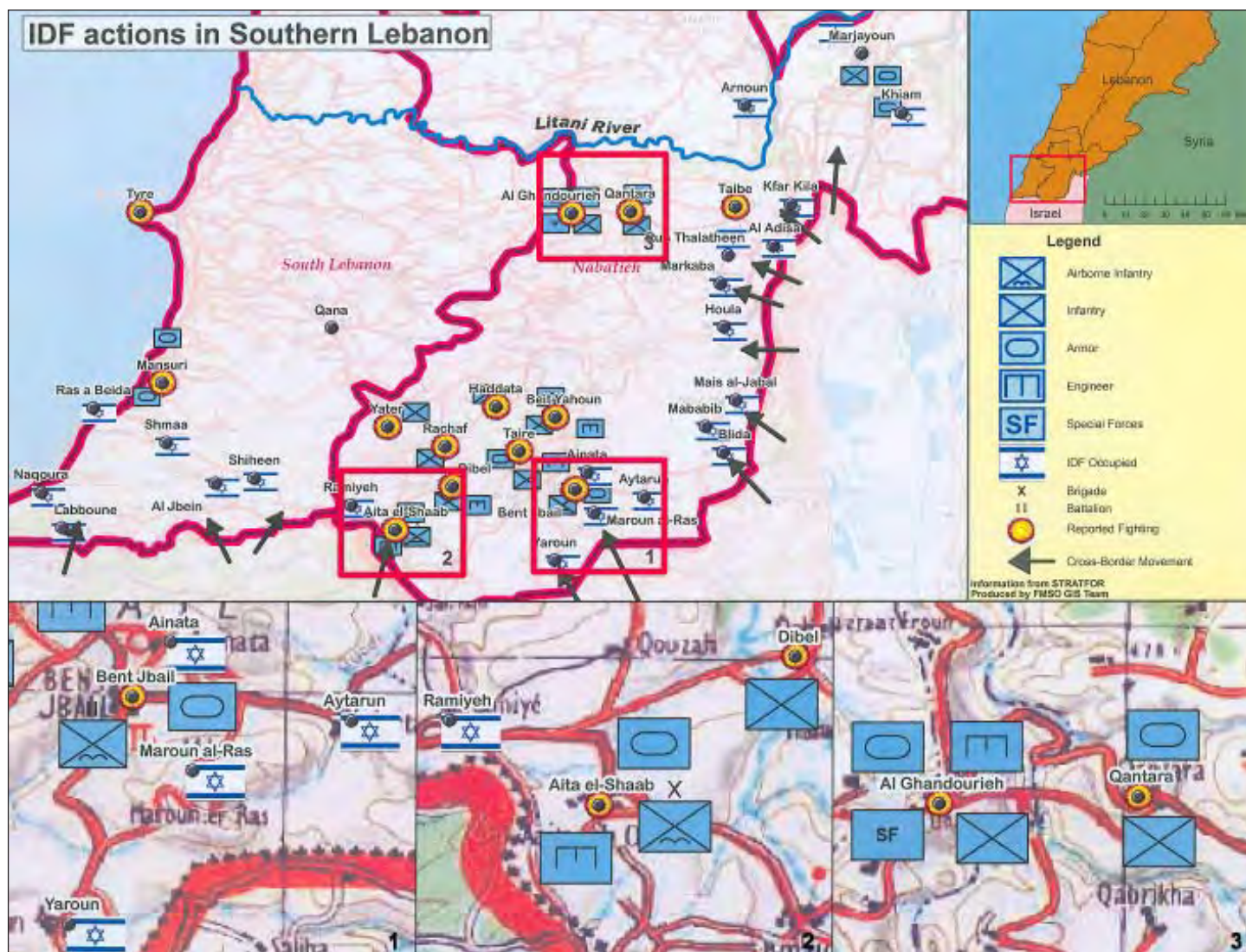
During most battles in Lebanon, IDF troops were operating with limited close air support (CAS) at their disposal. The Israeli air force (IAF) decided early on to limit the use of the AH-64 Apache helicopter and the AH-1 Cobra helicopter in Lebanon. This was due to a belief among senior IAF leaders that the IR had the capability to shoot down helicopters with the SA-18 Grail. Instead, the IAF used more armed UAVs to support troops on the ground. The IAF used fighter jets against deeper targets.

### IDF's Failed Strategy

It is important to point out that Israel never perceived Hezbollah as a threat to its existence. Unlike previous wars where large armies threatened to invade, Hezbollah's sole aim was to harass Israel by shooting missiles into its territory. Therefore, the Israeli military adopted a strategy of gentle force escalation.

Initially, Israel tried to force the Lebanese government to take care of the Hezbollah problem. The IAF did this by bombing key Lebanese infrastructure. This tactic guaranteed the least amount of Israeli casualties since ground troops would not be involved.

Figure 1 — IDF Actions in Southern Lebanon





[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2006\\_Israel-Lebanon\\_conflict](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2006_Israel-Lebanon_conflict)

*Residents survey damage done to a building following a rocket attack in Haifa, Israel, July 17, 2006.*

However, it became quite clear that the Lebanese government was in no position to confront the Hezbollah.

The IAF's next move was to heavily bomb the IR targets from the air. This tactic would also minimize Israeli troop exposure. Unfortunately, days of heavy bombardment proved to be futile. The damage caused by many countries to lose sympathy for Israel.

After days of failed results, the IDF decided to initiate limited ground operations using battalion-size combat elements. But, the lack of soldier training and preparedness in high-intensity warfare, coupled with the small size of units, undermined the success of these operations. It was only towards the end of the conflict that the IDF decided to use larger combat elements with more firepower into Lebanon. However, at this point, it was too little, too late for Israel. The world would not allow more fighting, and Israel was pressured to accept a UN-sponsored cease fire.

In sum, the overall Israeli strategy was one of escalating force. The Israeli escalation was slow and gradual, which gave IR fighters much flexibility and freedom to carry on operations. Ironically, by being so careful to prevent friendly casualties, Israel's feeble strategy probably caused more casualties than a robust strategy would have.

In retrospect, had the IDF secured a 40-kilometer area to the north of the Lebanese border, it would have been much easier to sweep the area and destroy IR targets within the area. IR fighters would have been trapped without the ability to escape north.

**IDF's Failed Tactics** — Initially, the IDF thought that the IR's main defensive line would be right at the border with Israel, when in reality, they were much deeper inland. IR forces baited the IDF into coming

deeper into Lebanon. The IDF stepped right into the IR's trap. Once there, IR forces unleashed their prepared defenses.

Israeli ground troops were often playing a cat-and-mouse game with IR fighters. Israeli forces would often capture an IR fighting position just to discover that its defenders had escaped to another fighting position. IR fighters moved around the battlefield quite freely.

During the war, the senior IDF commanders decided to use Israeli armor in a combat supply role instead of a direct combat role. Thus, Merkava tanks were often tasked to escort medical or supply vehicles at low speeds. This made Israeli tanks quite easy to target and destroy. For this reason, the IDF lost a significant number of tanks.

In retrospect, had the IDF taken the time to properly identify the IR's main defensive positions, they could have flanked the strong points and overwhelmed them with precision fire while rolling up the flanks.

By failing to do this, the Israelis played right into the IR's game and experienced a replay of Verdun!

**IR Forces** — IR forces succeeded in inflicting many casualties on the IDF by being creative and flexible in their tactics and techniques. The IR did not attempt to fight the IDF head-on with battalions and brigades of armored vehicles and infantry. Five Arab-Israeli wars have proved that concept to be foolish. Instead, the IR chose to fight in a prepared defense in-depth. Knowing Israeli weaknesses, the prepared defense seemed like the best tactic to use. Israeli weaknesses were:

- 1) Israel's reluctance to inflict many civilian casualties.
- 2) Israel's reluctance to sustain many friendly casualties.
- 3) The IDF's lack of recent experience in regular or mountainous terrain.

Several key factors contributed to the IR's success on the battlefield. First, IR commanders issued clear and achievable missions to their front-line combatants. Their sole objective was to survive and keep shooting missiles at Israel. IR soldiers accomplished these missions well while inflicting IDF casualties. Second, IR soldiers had excellent knowledge of the terrain and were more committed to fight and win than the average IDF soldier. Third, the IR fought the IDF with the minimum amount of fighters needed.

Finally, IR forces were able to dominate and control the battle by keeping the IDF constantly off-balance. They achieved this by ambushing IDF troops relentlessly.

## Conclusion

Israel relied too much on airpower alone to get the job done. After days of bombing southern Lebanon, hundreds of missiles were still raining on Israel. When the IDF high command realized that ground forces were needed, they launched them without proper training, equipment, and intelligence. Essentially, the IDF was set up for failure. The IDF had been focused solely on counterinsurgency for the past 16 years. Now, it was time to maneuver on regular terrain except the IDF was no longer trained for that type of combat.

The IDF discovered that terrorist organizations and armies adjust their tactics and doctrine based on the adversary's strengths and weaknesses. The IDF now realizes that air power alone cannot win a war and that their soldiers should be fully trained in maneuver warfare as well as counterinsurgency operations.

Israel fought a stateless army, not a guerrilla force. Israel was surprised to find a versatile enemy that was comfortable fighting in the defense. The war was a definite wake-up call for Israel. It highlighted the dangers of specializing in certain war-fighting skills while neglecting other skills. Emphasizing only a particular type of training can be disastrous in combat. Military leaders should not focus all training to meet today's threats, for tomorrow, the threat may change.

IDF soldiers could have been more successful on the battlefield had they been trained properly. The immediate cost for Israel was tragic: 117 soldiers and 41 civilians died and Israel suffered a huge psychological blow. More dangerously, the war in Lebanon II gave terrorist states and organizations renewed hope that modern armies, like the IDF, can be defeated.

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A list of references for this article is on file and available through *Infantry Magazine*.

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